acting like lovers (how did we get here?)
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acting like lovers (how did we get here?)

by lohoron

Summary

"You’re pretty much the full package. Sans the faggy haircut.”

“Hey, fuck you,” Matt laughs back, elbowing Ben in the ribs, running a hand through his hair. “This shit is boy-next-door all the way.”

“Yeah, I can see that,” Ben smirks. “In a gay porn kinda way, sure.”

Notes

title from "you said something" by pj harvey <3

They shared a corny moment the day Matt graduated high school. Right after the ceremony, they told their parents not to wait up and made their way past Rindge Field to the park across the street. The place was crawling with fellow graduates, some cracking open beers in broad daylight, others reluctantly getting their photos taken by overbearing parents.

And then there was Ben and Matt, sitting on one of the picnic benches, side by side, sharing a weighted silence and a single cigarette.

It was weird. Making a big deal out of it felt just as strange as pretending it wasn't happening. And realistically, Ben knew that Matt would be a fucking ten minute walk away. He knew they'd be in each other's space all the goddamn time, but that wasn't the point.

"So," Ben said noncommittally, looking over at Matt's face muddled with both excitement and fear, feeling his heart drop.

"So," Matt responded, nodding his head and passing the Marlboro off to Ben.

"You find my replacement yet?" Ben asked, letting out a chuckle right after.

They do this thing often. The feelings-thing. Neither of them were raised to be particularly restrictive with what they could share with others, leaning on the side of oversharing, really.

"Yeah, six-foot blonde chick with huge cans. Looks just like you," Matt attempted to lighten the mood, and it worked a little, making Ben elbow him with a smile on his face. "We got the whole summer, man. We'll be fine."

Ben nodded. He knew that. Of course he knew that. "Yeah."

"I'll be a fuckin' bike ride away."

Ben nodded again. He knew that, too. "Yeah."

"C'mon, man. Lighten up. I'm not dying."

"Fuck off," Ben groaned back, no malice behind it, handing him the cigarette. "It's just gonna be different."

"We can handle it," Matt just shrugged. "I'm not gonna abandon you, idiot. I know that's what you're thinking."

“That’s not what I was thinking,” Ben attempted to deny. He looked the opposite way and scoffed.

Matt wrapped an arm around his shoulder, an act that Ben knew was supposed to be comforting but made him feel like some unknown organ inside him was trembling, getting squeezed tight until it ruptured. “Shut up,” he murmured, squeezing his shoulder. “You’re my best friend. Some stupid school isn’t gonna undo that.”

“Whatever,” Ben mumbled back, lifting his head.

“I don’t wanna hang out with those snobs anyway,” Matt declared, ruffling Ben's hair before removing his hand entirely.

“You better not become a fucking snob,” Ben warned. He fully stared back at Matt for the first time since they sat down. “I’ll kill you.”

Matt laughed and nodded. “You have my full permission.”

It’s Friday afternoon. School just got out and Ben’s already on his bike over to Matt’s dorm. And thankfully, Matt was right.

Some stupid school has, in fact, not changed them.

Well, maybe a little. But in the ways Ben is okay with. They don’t see each other *every* day, but more days than not. Sometimes it’s a two hour study session — or rather, a two hour Matt study session while Ben moans and complains about Matt not paying attention to him — and sometimes it’s Matt staying over for a night, Ben staying over for a couple of nights, Matt dropping by the school to hang out with everybody, Ben dropping by with a frisbee and dragging Matt out of his dorm.

Matt even gets a small role in a film they were both gunning for, but Ben doesn’t give a shit. He’s happy to have some more cash in their bank account to travel back to New York for more auditions.

Ben bikes past the museum, past the bookstore, speeds over to the rack he always leaves his bike at, and practically runs over to the yard. Luckily, the dedicated group of smokers who always hang out in the back of Matthews Hall are here today and they let panting Ben in

without a second thought.

He runs up the stairs to Matt's room, 201, and bursts through the door entering the common space. Jason, one of Matt's roommates, is reading on the couch with his feet up and flinches when he smacks the door open. "Shit, sorry, man!" Ben exclaims immediately.

"God, you scared the hell out of me," Jason laughs back, putting his book page-down and walking over, going in for a half hug and patting Ben's shoulder. "You coming to David's party?"

Ben nods in response even though Matt hasn't said a word about it. If Jason's going, Matt's going. And if Matt's going, Ben's definitely going. "What time's it start?" He asks, stealing a peanut from the bowl of trail mix Jason had presumably set out for himself.

"Nine-ish. Doesn't really matter. Show up whenever."

Ben sticks up his thumb and saunters backwards until his back hits Matt's door. He doesn't knock, just opens the door wide and jumps inside before dropping it closed loudly.

Matt's head snaps back, letting out a sigh of relief when he realizes it's just Ben. "You asshole," Matt laughs, throwing his notebook at him. "You gotta stop doing that. I always think I'm about to get fucking killed."

"Nah," Ben grins, plops down on Matt's bed. "I like scaring you. Puts you in your place."

He shuts the undoubtedly uninteresting textbook he was reading, making a few steps over to dump his body right next to Ben's on his bed, backs against the wall. "Man, I'm exhausted," he yawns out, resting his head on Ben's shoulder immediately. "Jason tell you about the party later?"

"Yeah," Ben said quietly, trying to ignore the fact that he notices Matt must've gotten a new shampoo because his hair smells like peppermint.

"You wanna go?" He asks tentatively, fully slouching against Ben now.

"If you wanna, yeah," Ben responds, resting his head on top of Matt's and playing with a hangnail on his thumb. "We don't have to."

Matt shrugs, takes Ben's hand and studies it for a second. "Stop biting

your fucking nails. Looks like shit."

Ben scoffs, takes his hand back. Matt laughs all hearty and pure, like he's finally back in his body. "Asshole," he mutters, but his crossed knee is brushing the side of Matt's thigh and he's still smelling the goddamn peppermint, so maybe it doesn't hold the weight he wants it to.

"We can go," Matt just responds, still half-way caught in a chuckle. "But you gotta borrow some clothes."

"What's wrong with my clothes?" Ben asks, vaguely offended on behalf of both of them because the shirt he's wearing was quite literally gifted to him *by* Matt, lifting his head off of Matt's to look down at his attire. Graphic tee, some jeans. Okay, they're a bit… lived-in.

Matt lifts his head, too, giving Ben's outfit a scan. He raises an eyebrow at Ben after the one-up, as if to ask *really?* without saying a single word.

"Fine. I'll borrow a tiny little shirt and your short ass jeans. It's gonna look even worse, y'know," he huffs, but he can't help letting the corners of his mouth quirk up.

"You left your jeans here last time, remember? When you wore my fucking pajamas home?" Matt recalls, bitter, letting out a yawn and resting his head back on Ben's shoulder.

Of course Ben remembers. Great night, but the following morning he was hungover enough to want nothing to do with any form of denim.

"Want me to pull out the mattress?" Ben asks, hooking an arm around Matt and scratching the side of his head evenly, softly.

Ben has stayed here so many goddamn times that he brought over the mattress his mom bought years ago, when Matt and Ben first started becoming MattandBen. Originally, that's where Matt slept when they had sleepovers. It lasted all of two months until they just slept in Ben's queen sized bed with the two of them.

It never seemed weird to either of them. Never seemed weird to their families. And eventually, that mattress became Casey's whenever he hung out with them.

Now it's shoved underneath Matt's little twin-sized dorm bed, a

permanent fixture sticking out under the frame slightly.

(They had tried to make it work, really, sleeping on the twin-sized bed together. It's just what they were used to.

Ben groaned, his back to Matt. "Okay, this is—"

"Yeah. This is only gonna work if we're literally fucking on top of each other." Matt kicked Ben's legs and groaned back

"I'm good," Ben said, flinging the blanket off of himself and grabbing the pillow under his head. "I'll take the floor. You got a blanket?")

"Nah, we'll set it up after the party," Matt responds quietly, his head subtly leaning into Ben's hand.

They stayed silent for a little bit, not needing to say anything at all. Matt's breathing becomes deeper, slower, and Ben thinks he might've fallen asleep. Which kind of sucks because now his arm is stuck in this goddamn position and he knows for a fact that it's gonna go all tingly and heavy once he's actually able to rip it away. He stops scratching at Matt's scalp but Matt stirs a little immediately, nudging against his hand.

"Why'd you stop?" His voice is small and needy. Ben smiles.

"Thought you fell asleep." He immediately resumes, biting the inside of his cheek to keep his smile from spreading across his entire face. "Hey, you have any luck with that chick from physics?"

Matt groans and shakes his head slightly, burying his face into Ben's shoulder. "She gave me her number."

"Alright, man, there we go!" He cheers on, grabbing the back of Matt's head and pulsing his fingers through his hair.

"I called her the other night. Wouldn't stop going on about the fucking Princess Bride," he sighs out. "I left the phone for at least a minute to grab something and she was *still* talking."

"What'd you do?" Ben asks, frowning.

"Said I'd call her soon and threw the number away," Matt laughs back, grabbing Ben's hangnail hand again, picking at the skin around his non-hangnail nails.

"Fuckin' idiot," he mumbles back.

Here's why Matt doesn't really get laid despite being one of the best-looking guys in all of Boston: he just *needs* everything to be perfect. Needs it to *mean something*, or whatever.

Ben knows, if he got the goddamn chance more often, he wouldn't be so stupid. So what if she calls to talk about some stupid movie?

"What're you talking about? She was insufferable," Matt defends.

"She's not gonna be talking about the movie when you guys bang, genius," Ben scoffs, flicking Matt's temple and causing Matt to sit up fully, eyebrows furrowed.

Ben can't keep himself from smiling, nearly breaking out into a laugh, staring at the offended look on Matt's face.

"Whatever," Matt mutters, sits back against the wall, head no longer on Ben's shoulder. "Not like you know anything."

Ben grins and bumps his shoulder against Matt's. "I know the chances of getting laid are pretty fucking close to 0% if you throw out her number."

"She probably wants a relationship or something."

Ben knows that might be true, and he also knows that there is no way for Matt to accurately have extrapolated that information from a phone call that appears to have been exclusively about The Princess Bride. A part of Ben, a very loud and obnoxious part, is intensely excited that Matt doesn't seem interested in dating. Overjoyed by the prospect that he'd rather get his peppermint scented hair stroked by his best friend in his ridiculously messy dorm instead.

"You could do that. If you wanted," Ben offers, laying it out in a way he hopes isn't too indicative of any non-existent desire for Matt to actually get a girlfriend. "You're pretty much the full package. Sans the faggy haircut."

"Hey, fuck you," Matt laughs back, elbowing Ben in the ribs, running a hand through his hair. "This shit is boy-next-door all the way."

"Yeah, I can see that," Ben smirks. "In a gay porn kinda way, sure."

Matt pounds a pillow against Ben's face, forcing a hit of the back of his head against the wall, loudly cackling, "You watch a lotta gay porn to come to that conclusion, Benny?" Which is enough for Ben to reach

past him and grab the other pillow in an attempt to escalate the attack.

And if Matt cares at all about getting laid, he certainly doesn't show it. And that's fine with Ben.

Ben is standing in the center of the mess that is Matt's room, shirtless, hands on his hips, while Matt tries desperately to find a single shirt that doesn't have a stain on it or isn't ridiculously short on Ben's recently expanded torso.

He pulls out a shirt that is both clean and long, but has a ridiculously ugly graphic on it; Ben immediately recognizes it as the shirt they both got for participating in the blood drive last year. That's out the window — as it should *literally* be.

"Jesus, this is impossible," Matt mumbles, staring over at Ben standing there in all his gangly glory. "I could've sworn I had at least five of your shirts in here."

"I'm certainly *missing* at least five of them."

Matt snarls. "Stain or short?"

Ben groans and cracks open one of the beers Matt had stocked away, scratching the back of his head. "You pick. I don't get why you won't let me wear my own shirt."

"Ben," Matt says, lips in a tight line, walking over and squeezing Ben's shoulders. The skin-to-skin contact is strange, not new, but personal and red-hot. Almost claustrophobic. Ben takes a breath through his nose and raises his eyebrows at Matt, trying to seem as unbothered as him. "It is a shirt from summer camp. I am not letting you walk around looking like a twelve year old."

Ben belches in his face. Matt closes his eyes and nods like he should've expected it. "You don't want me stealing all the talent. I get it."

"Buddy, you're sixteen. I don't think *the talent* wants you all too bad," Matt laughs, squeezes his shoulders again, and turns back to the closet.

Ben takes a sip of his PBR and crosses his arms with his hip cocked. Fine, Matt is probably right. College girls will most likely not want a kid still in high school, whatever, but he didn't have to be so *cruel* about it. "Wanna bet?"

Matt moves on to searching the floor, discarded t-shirts plentiful. "Bet on what?" Matt mutters, picking up a black shirt and holding it up to examine.

"Whoever gets more numbers tonight wins," Ben challenges, eyebrows raised, taking another gulp. Matt moves over to him, holds the black shirt against his torso like he's taking detailed mental measurements before shoving it into Ben's hands.

"Try that one on." Matt completely ignores the bet.

Ben shoves his beer into Matt's hand, finding the bottom of the t-shirt and pulling it over his head. It fits decently well. It meets right at the line of his jeans, which is still a tad shorter than he would like it, but beggars can't be choosers. Not that he's begging to wear Matt's clothes. He would never do that.

Matt looks him up and down, one hand resting on his chin, and nods. He licks his lips, takes a sip from Ben's beer before handing it back, and smoothes the shirt out slightly. "Had to make sure you'd be any competition at all. Otherwise it'd just be unfair," Matt smirks.

Such a smug little fuck. Too smug for someone who has kissed all of one girl since coming to Harvard. "Oh, you're on, Damon."

Ben quickly throws back the rest of his beer and lands the can on the floor, no comment from Matt. He walks over to the dust-covered mirror in the corner of the room while Matt changes his shirt, rolling down the bunched-up sleeves. Ben ruffles his hair, tries to get it in decent shape with very little success. He probably should have showered in the morning but Casey was hogging the bathroom and life is unfair, so he just rolled with the punches.

The view from Matt's room isn't anything too special. It looks out onto the Yard, the window about as small as an oversized textbook, but at night, Ben has noticed, you can see fireflies lighting up like they're trying to solve a dullness in the air. The first time he landed his eyes on them, Matt and him were smoking a poorly rolled joint, crowded in the corner, nothing but the streetlights surrounding the yard illuminating either of them.

(This one bright little pill came floating up against the window, staying still, resting. Ben, in his enamored state, felt much too close to it. Likened it landing on the glass to something ceremonious like Matt's graduation or that time they nearly burnt down his house over-baking cookies. He wanted to reach out, place it on his finger, and parade it around like it was proof of the Second Coming of Christ, but he settled for taking a deep breath and turning to Matt, joint in hand.

"I would be a firefly. If we could choose," he'd said, all toothy and heavy-lidded.

Any other human being would have frowned at him, rolled their eyes, told him to sit the hell down because he was clearly much too stoned for standing up straight. Matt didn't. Matt just said: "I think I'd be a badger."

Ben smiled, took a hit. "I can see that."

"Might be hard, though. Hanging out."

Ben shrugged, passed the joint and watched the firefly move away. "We'd find a way.")

And right now, Matt is standing in front of that very window, smoking a cigarette, wearing the faded Red Sox shirt Ben got him at a game Matt couldn't attend, and he suddenly wishes he was a firefly again. Maybe Matt could actually be a badger. Maybe finding each other would be their journey.

He blinks a couple of times. That's too much.

He walks over to Matt and steals the cigarette from between his fingers, inhaling freely and exhaling it into Matt's room.

"C'mon man, out the window," Matt laughs, taking one big step to snatch his cigarette back. "R.A. got on my ass. Says he's allergic to the smell or some shit."

"Are you kidding me?" Ben scoffs. "He's full of shit, y'know that."

"Yeah, but he can also have me kicked out of the dorms. So I'll stick to his good side." He takes another puff out the window, and Ben thinks about the shared joint and the way Matt has always put too much of his mouth against it, lets the paper go all soggy and gross, never finishing to the roach because it's always practically disintegrated by then.

It's weirdly endearing.

Ben shoves him aside slightly to steal another huff, respecting his wishes and blowing the smoke out the window. "And what's his *good side* look like, Matty?" He teases, bumping his hip against Matt's with a wide grin.

"Like your fuckin' mother, idiot," Matt notes back, elbowing his ribs, which hurts more than Ben leads on.

"She'll hear about this slander." Ben passes the cigarette back with a cackling laugh. "You're never coming over ever again."

"*If I die of cancer, it'll be half your fault,*" Matt quotes Dog Day Afternoon, putting on his best (really terrible; obnoxiously high-pitched) Sylvia impression, taking a long drag of his cigarette right after just to really drive it home.

"*I'm a Catholic. I don't wanna hurt anybody,*" Ben quotes back, hands raised in the air.

Matt snorts and stumps out the cigarette in the ashtray he keeps fixed by the window. "You *wish* you were decent enough to be Pacino," he laughs, shouldering Ben to get past him, taking one quick glance in the dusty mirror before heading straight for the door. "Let's get this show on the road, Benjamin."

Ben smirks and rubs his hands together, which he realizes might be a little off-putting but it's mostly for the joke, he promises, so he quickly follows Matt out of his room and into the common room.

Jason's already gone. They're about thirty minutes late, but that doesn't really mean anything when it comes to shitty parties where everybody just wants to get as wasted as humanly possible.

Ben is good at parties. Which is to say that Ben is incredible at talking to people once he's about two (okay, three) beers deep, and knows that dancing (see: grinding) is sequestered to approximately three corners of most house parties. And, fine, maybe he's a little boyish looking. A little too lanky, or *whatever,* but at least he's goddamn determined and unafraid of a good time.

It's a known fact to Ben that Matt is not so good at parties. At the very least, he never used to be back in high school. Half the time, he'd pass out on a couch (once on a floor, once underneath a bed) and lean on Ben all the way back home. The other half, he's putting too much

weight on being Ben's goddamn protector, making sure *Ben* doesn't find himself under any beds (which he does, of course) or in any deep ditches. There's a small sliver of space previous to or following those events in which Matt would talk to girls, smoke weed, sing unprovoked, or somehow manage a jumbled mess of all three.

But right now, Ben feels a little (a lot) out of his element.

He's been to college dorm parties before, okay? Alright, only Harvard ones, really, but it still counts. They always vaguely suck. Usually end with the unfortunate host getting busted or the overambitious lightweight dribbling throw-up onto overused carpet.

Usually, most importantly, he's able to stick by Matt's side. They people-watch, make up stories of drunken couples slouched against each other in the corners, get ridiculously stoned and zone out in front of a TV inevitably running in the background. Point being, usually it's *them.* Together. And, sure, maybe they take twenty-minute breaks from each other to try (and, being honest, oftentimes fail) to secure a girl's attention, but they rejoin. There's always pleasure in knowing that whatever happens with whatever chick he's trying to pick up, he'll be able to report it back to Matt.

But he challenged Matt. And he's been here for half an hour and he hasn't seen Matt beyond one two-second eye-contact exchange from across the crowded room.

And he can't focus. At *all.*

There's a hot girl in front of him. Short. Shorter than Matt. Brown hair. Longer than Matt's. She has blue eyes but they're dull, faded. More gray than Matt's. She smells like orange peel and vanilla and Tito's. It's not great. But she's *hot* and he's here to win a goddamn *challenge* and so far he has one measly number.

"What're you drinking?" He asks her, leaning in close to speak directly against her ear without needing to shout. Girls like that. He's pretty sure girls like that.

"Vodka soda," she smiles back against his ear, leaning her hand on his shoulder. She hands him her cup.

His first thought is that she should probably be more careful with who she gives her cup to. His second thought is that he's probably guaranteed her number if he gets her another vodka soda. So he does.

The ‘open bar’ situation at David’s dorm parties is always laughably extravagant. It’s a plastic fold out he claims he stole from someone’s front yard stuffed with all the alcohol and mixers it could possibly manage. David never charges anyone for the drinks. Says the liquor store charge in his bank account is a big *fuck you* to his parents’ loaded wallets. Fucking idiot.

Ben pours about a shot and a half in the solo cup and starts to pour the seltzer when he feels a familiar set of hands slam down on his shoulders.

Matt leans in close, mouth to his ear the way he put his mouth to that girl’s ear, and okay, yeah, girls *definitely* like that. “I’m up to two,” Matt’s voice is laced with an obnoxious smirk.

It’s weird how easily he becomes flustered around Matt after just a couple of drinks. The two years Matt has on him almost never bother him, but right now, he feels his age so sincerely, concretely.

Ben turns around to face Matt and plasters on a painted grin. Matt’s eyes are shiny and downturned in the way they get when he’s childishly excited, his smile lopsided and sincere. Ben licks his lips before he leans his mouth against Matt’s ear, “Slow and steady wins the race.”

Matt cackles in response and squeezes Ben’s waist. “Not tonight, firefly.”

He’s gone just as quickly as he approached and Ben feels a little dizzy (okay, a lot) and he’s not sure why. His neck feels warm and his ears are buzzing and he smelled that Matt is drinking tequila and he fucking *loves* tequila Matt.

Tequila Matt is touchy. Zero boundaries, floating and blabbering, spilling half-truths he vehemently denies the following morning.

(“I didn’t fuck Chrissy Polachek,” Matt groaned out, dry-heaving as he downed half a jar of pickle juice. Poor guy could barely keep his eyes open.

“Not what you said last night,” Ben mumbled with a stupid grin, gingerly sipping down his water in a more conventional hangover cure method. “You described her tits. In detail.”

Matt scratched at his eyebrow as he set down his jar, dared to look at Ben with a look Ben knew meant something adjacent to *well, you see…*

“So you *did* fuck Chrissy Polachek,” he confirmed, nudging Matt’s hip with his own.

“No. Not— We made out. Whatever,” Matt dismissed as he rubbed at his forehead. “God, what else did I say?”

Ben had felt this strange mix of pride and discomfort and decided to shove it aside for both of their sakes. “Nothing much, man. Snored like hell, though.”

And if Matt had turned to Ben that past night and reached a hand to his cheek, stroked his thumb against Ben’s cheekbone, flickered his eyes closed and sleepily, honestly, candidly, said, “I love you,” right before falling asleep, he’ll never know.)

Ben composes himself and picks up the vodka soda to head back to the brown-haired gray-blue-eyed girl before she starts to suspect him of serious foul play.

“Sorry it took a sec,” he shout-says over the shitty blend playing (seriously, is that *Sister Golden Hair*?) as he hands her her drink.

She just smiles and takes a big gulp before turning her attention back on Ben. “I haven’t seen you around before,” she notes, words slurring slightly.

“Yeah! Yeah, I don’t do the party thing too often,” he responds, hoping she’s not picking up on his high schooler insecurity and frank lack of finesse.

She slips her hand back against his shoulder, lets her rosy lips curl into a soft, almost reassuring, smile. “What’s your name?” She asks, takes a step closer until Ben feels like the girl in this scenario, eyes scanning behind her in intimidation of her confidence.

“It’s, uh, it’s Ben,” Ben says tentatively, trying his best to smile in a not terribly awkward way. “Yours?”

She trails a nail past his shoulder, up to his jaw. “Cameron.” Her breath is warm against his ear and he feels weak and small and all the things you’re not supposed to feel when you’re trying to get a girl’s number. “I like you, Ben.”

Ben swallows a deep breath. With Cameron’s mouth still to his ear, he scours the room with anxious eyes for any sign of Matt. Just to give him confidence. Maybe to show him that this girl won’t get off him,

that he might get even luckier than just a number tonight. Just the insinuation of it would be enough for Ben to rub in Matt's face. *Yeah, dude, she wanted me so bad,* he'd say, *but I asked for her number so I could move on. Had to win the challenge.*

"Yeah?" Ben says, voice cracking, giving his age away. He takes a shallow breath and closes his eyes, unable to locate Matt, slipping his hand across her waist. She lets him. He might be in a dancing (see: grinding) corner.

He's at a bit of a standstill because it's barely been 45 minutes and he only has one phone number and he already doesn't see a way out of this interaction.

"You gonna come to more parties from now on?" She asks, leans away a little to take a sip of her drink.

Ben can see her soft smile. She's hot. Ben should be going insane over her right now but he's going more insane over the fact that he can't see Matt and he should probably be more drunk and he needs her number and— "I usually only go if Matt goes," he decides to say, letting it spill out of him.

"Matt?" She tilts her head a little.

"Yeah. Yeah, he— We're best friends. He drags me to these things," he half-lies. Not that he needs to be dragged. He just needs it to not be a school night.

She smiles, nods. "Well, tell *Matt* that I—" she pulls a pen out of her purse and grabs Ben's arm, tepidly placing the cap between her teeth, "will be waiting for a call."

She scribbles her number, writes her name above it, and screws the cap to her pen back on with a drunken smile.

Ben stares at her for a second. This is—

He can't pick up other girls when he has someone's number plastered across his forearm like a fucking tattoo. Fuck. God, he's gonna lose.

"I gotta go. Bio exam Monday, blah blah blah," she giggles, gripping his shoulder again. "It was nice to meet you, Ben."

"Yeah! Yeah," he hurries out. "I'll call you. Cameron. I'll call," he stutters, holding up his borderline tattoo, smiling.

“And thanks for the drink,” she acknowledges, shoving the rest of it in his hands. “I’ll see you around.”

He downs it as soon as she turns to find her friends. Two short sips and it’s gone and he’s looking for more immediately, stumbling over to the makeshift open bar.

He’s not even sure why he’s so flustered. He’s opening a Budweiser and he’s frazzled because he feels picked apart, examined, and he can’t understand why. It doesn’t make sense.

She just gave him her number. That’s a win. Why doesn’t he feel like celebrating? If Matt is still lingering at two numbers, they’re tied by now. Matt. God, he needs to find Matt.

He downs his beer in four angry sips, slams it down on the fold-out table and opens another before making his way through a crowd far too plentiful for a goddamn dorm party. He pushes through with annoyed *excuse me*s and a couple of elbows.

Once he gets to the very corner of the room, he surveys the crowd. Matt is still here. He can’t be that hard to spot.

And surely, there he is. Propped against the wall, surrounded by four chicks, talking and gesturing with that stupidly charming smile with his hand around the neck of a Miller high life.

Ben makes his way over, a few more elbows, a few more apologies, determined to end this contest because he’s been fucking marked by Cameron, for God’s sake, and he just wants to hang out with his best friend. As soon as Matt catches his eye, he cheers, loudly, his voice ricocheting off the walls. He throws his arms up, beer sloshing, motioning for Ben to join him.

“The man of the hour!” Matt laughs, clearly more inebriated than Ben, or just more relaxed, throwing an arm around him tightly. “I was just talking about you.”

Ben frowns through a smile, as if his face is asking *why*, and he looks out at the girls surrounding them.

The girl right next to Matt leans over, whispers, “You’re right, he *is* cute,” in Matt’s ear and Ben swears he must’ve imagined it.

“He was just telling us you’re an actor,” a redhead on his right says, running a hand across his forearm while he attempts to hide his other

phone-numbered arm from sight.

“Yeah. We both are,” he notes, still confused, frowning in Matt’s direction.

The guy couldn’t look more smug. His eyes are all droopy but the quirk of his lips is undeniably striking, bordering on flirty. “He said you were on a TV show,” the same girl gawks, and Ben can’t really get a good look at her because Matt is lifting his beer bottle to slide between his lips and he looks so fucking *pretty* that it’s disarming.

Ben only lets himself think like this in the safety of inebriation. There is a high chance that he either won’t remember looking at Matt’s blushed cheeks and shiny mouth tomorrow and it brings him comfort to know his thoughts are momentary; never rehashed sober.

(That’s a lie. Ben has wiped too much greasy tomato sauce off the corners of Matt’s mouth, has hooked their feet together in bed too many times, has stared at Matt’s closed eyelashes cascading shadows onto his cheek far too often, for it not to be a lie.)

But he can ignore a strange stomach drop or a bone-deep tingling. He can ignore laughing a bit too loud or smiling a bit too bright at everything Matt says.

He cannot ignore looking Matt up and down, squeezed next to him like there’s no space left in this room, and zeroing in on his slick lips despite the gaggle of hot girls surrounding them. He cannot ignore the way Matt’s mouth next to his ear, the exact place that girl (Cathy—Cammy—? Whatever her name is) put her lips just minutes ago, feels like it’s going to make him explode or melt or freeze or move into any other state bodies can’t reasonably morph into.

“Answer her, Benny,” Matt whispers, sing-songy, breath red-hot, and Ben knows he’s all infuriating and annoying and beautiful and Ben is sincerely finding it difficult to breathe.

He licks his lips, stares back at the girl next to him and nods, trying to remember what she asked. Right. TV show. Right. “Oh. Yeah, yeah,” he dismisses, taking a sip of his beer in a futile attempt to appear casual, “I was a kid, though. Not very— Not super *cool* or whatever.”

She laughs like he made any joke at all. No, she laughs like he just made the world’s most hysterical and clever joke, head thrown back, squeezing his arm. “I’m sure you were wonderful,” she slurs out after, running her hand up his arm.

Ben catches Matt's eye staring at them. He should impress him. He should try and impress him. "What's your name?" He asks her, and Matt's arm is still slung around his shoulder, reaching back to rub his neck with one strong movement like a non-vocal encouragement.

"Layla," she giggles back, taking a sip from her drink.

He can't help but wonder: Why the fuck is Matt helping him? This is a competition. A competition Matt probably knew he was going to win from the start. One he *was* winning.

He turns his head to look at Matt. Matt, who is already talking to some other girl. Matt, who is saying *Ben and I* over and over again. Matt, who is gripping his fingers into his shoulder like Ben is his goddamn *possession.* Matt, whose hair is all messy and played with. Matt, who brought him to a party again and told some girls that he's an actor and that he's cute, or some iteration of that. Matt, who is fucking pitying him and lying about him being a serious fucking actor or something because he thinks Ben needs help in the lady department.

Well, fuck that. He kissed Tina Brown just last week. Matt hasn't been with anyone since Sloane last month. He's the one that needs fucking help.

The girl, Layla, Ben is pretty sure, talks again. Something along the lines of *Anybody home?*

Ben doesn't quite feel like responding. He breaks away from her, from Matt, and beelines to the fold-out table, knocking over a short tower of solo cups in a frantic desire to grab one. He fills it up halfway with the first clear liquor he sees. Tequila. Matt was drinking tequila.

Just as his mouth meets the white rim, liquid splashing against his upper lip, someone grabs at his shoulder and tugs hard.

"What the fuck was that, Ben?" Matt whisper-shouts, head motioned over at the girls standing in shared confusion.

Ben frowns and takes a big gulp, trying desperately not to make a face as to not minimize the importance of the disdain he currently holds towards Matt. "I should be asking *you* that question!" Ben whisper-shouts back, not bothering to survey their surroundings for any bystanders.

"I was helping you out, idiot," Matt hisses, smacking Ben's shoulder

again. “Why would you— She was *hot!*”

“I can’t fucking—” Ben looks around in search of a door or closet or *anything*, overwhelmed by the noise.

The dorm is laid out exactly the same as Matt’s, so he knows the door nearest to them is somebody’s bedroom, but he can’t be bothered to actually care about disrupting anyone’s space right now because he’s fucking pissed off.

Matt is treating him like some useless child. An ugly duckling begging for a crust of bread. He gets *plenty* of bread.

He grabs Matt’s arm and tugs him towards the door, knocking four harsh times and receiving no answer. He turns the knob and pushes Matt inside first.

Not empty, apparently.

“Hey, what the fuck?” Some guy exclaims, one hand tangled in some girl’s hair, the other grasping under her shirt, resting on the bed. Thankfully still fully clothed.

“Is this your room?” Ben asks.

The guy shakes his head.

“Cool. Get the fuck out.”

He opens the door fully, points to it, eyebrows raised. The guy scrambles, frowning, stumbling towards the door with the girl under his arm. He’s mumbling under his breath. Ben can’t hear him. Doesn’t even care to. He shuts the door behind them quickly and leans his back against it, staring out at Matt standing next to the bed with crossed arms.

He sighs. “So?”

“So, *what?* Why were you trying to set me up?”

“Sorry for being a good wingman,” Matt mutters, looks away, and Ben sees the moonlight coloring Matt’s face, bright and bothered.

Ben scoffs and pulls his arm up, displays the C-name girl’s number. He glances at it. Cameron. Right. He has Cameron’s number. “Didn’t need it, asshole. It was a competition. As in me against you?”

Matt shrugs. “I was bored.”

“Why do you treat me like a child?” Ben starts, downing the rest of his drink, not even needing to work on not making a face because something about this is getting to him. Really fucking getting to him.

(And maybe it’s the fact that Matt looked so good and wasn’t all his. The fact that Matt drank tequila and got touchy but not just with him. The fact that Matt was talking to multiple girls instead of him.

Maybe it’s the fact that Ben doesn’t know what to do when his brain does this; when it gets all Matt-filled and flowery and any attention anybody else could ever give him is completely obsolete. That it never gets like this around his other friends. That Matt is somehow *special.*

He can’t think about those things. He can’t think about the way he wants Matt’s hand back on his shoulders.)

“What the fuck are you on about?” Matt frowns and sets down his beer bottle on the desk opposite him. “It wasn’t malicious, Ben. Come on.”

“What, you just felt *so* bad for poor little Ben that you had to pretend like I was some hot shot?” Ben scoffs, his eyes refusing to meet Matt’s, drifting off behind him at the Iron Maiden poster plastered on the wall. “I don’t need your help, man.”

Matt steps closer to him. Ben feels a vague punch in his gut when Matt’s face becomes clearer because he looks like he’s almost laughing — like there’s some sense of pity Ben needs from him for his little outburst. “I know you don’t.”

“Then why did you—”

“I wasn’t trying to help you,” Matt groans, squeezing his eyes closed like he needs to be halfway absent to get his thoughts together.

Ben scans Matt’s scrunched face for insincerity, unable to place a solid reason for the way he’s acting. “What then?” He asks, impatiently, tequila starting to disbalance him.

“I— I was just talking about you, Ben,” Matt shrugs, head down, shoving a hand into the front pocket of his jeans.

Ben takes a confused moment and bites the inside of his cheek. “What?”

“Jesus, man, I don’t know. One girl asked about my fuckin’ shirt and I just— You came up. I pointed you out, y’know, while you were talking to that girl? And I just talked about you. I don’t know what you want me to say,” he rambles, scratching the back of his head and rolling on the balls of his feet. His jaw is clenched, anxious like he has anything to be anxious about.

(“Maya asked me if you and Matt were going out,” Jim casually said while chowing down on a fry stolen off of Ben’s lunch tray.

Ben choked on his shitty chicken tender and tried to look indifferent when he asked, “What did you say?”

Jim smirked. “That I’d have to check.”

Ben threw a fry directly into his face and scoffed. “Fuck you, man. She liked me.”

“Maybe before she noticed your Matt-swooning.”

“I do not *swoon* over anyone, dickhead,” Ben laughed back, but he had this intense fear bubbling. If she saw something he didn’t, who the fuck else did?

Jim grabbed the fry that fell off of his cheek from the table and stuffed it in his mouth. He gave Ben this all-knowing grin that’s never left his goddamn mind.)

Ben isn’t sure what to say.

Matt looks distraught and upset like he’s just been caught with his hand stuck in the goddamn cookie jar. Ashamed or maybe embarrassed or just plain annoyed. Ben is having too much trouble reading him when the energy is dependent on smelly socks and the sound of *Seasons in the Sun* blasting through the shut door.

The air between them, still a good few feet apart, is viscous. Ben can imagine reaching out and getting gumminess stuck to his fingers, trying to poke through but being resisted over and over again.

“Oh,” he whispers, throat clogged and sticky. “I don’t—”

He stops himself, not sure what he even wants to say. Does this mean something?

Is this allowed to mean something? He clenches his jaw as he watches

Matt's chin raise again, looking over at Ben concretely.

He can't tell what this is. He can't tell if the alcohol is convincing him that Matt's eyes have a glimmer of need in them or if they really just look like that right now. Watery and framed by his hopeful eyebrows. "Thought you— I don't know. I thought you got pissed off because you knew I was talking about you."

Ben chuckles and shakes his head and he can't tear his eyes away from Matt's. He can't. "I talk about you all the fuckin' time, idiot."

Matt shrugs. Takes a step forward. Ben feels the solid presence of the door against his back. The faintness of Matt's wafting tequila breath. "Really?"

Ben swallows the desire to lunge at him, this weird primal thing he can't suppress. "Yeah. Yeah, the guys are tired of hearing what you're up to."

When Ben's lips curl into an awkward smile, feeling strangely cornered, Matt's eyes avert down to them.

Matt licks his lips, brings them back up to Ben's eyes. It's so obvious. Ben feels dizzy with how obvious it is.

They've never been here before. Not this openly.

"You said I was cute," Ben mindlessly whispers, and fuck, fuck, Matt's face turns to this vague sense of fear, of reclusion. "Not rugged? Handsome?" He tries to lighten the mood, to pick up what 10-second-ago-him dropped on the floor.

Matt cracks a smile. His eyes move down to Ben's arms. "Rugged is a bit generous."

Ben smiles, too, and chooses to ignore the sweat dripping down his forehead.

His brain is empty. No, he wishes his brain was empty. Right now it's full enough to leave him incoherent, scrambling to pull at just one thought that doesn't go *Matt-lips-blue-Matt-handsome-Matt-Oh God.*

But then Matt's hand burns his bicep and Matt hesitates, nervous and avoidant, and Ben gasps like he's never fucking been touched before by any human being anywhere ever. And Matt's hand is gone in an instance. "Sorry, I just— Sorry. I thought—"

“No! No, I—” Ben tries, but his mouth can’t fully produce words, and Matt is all blushy and scared and, there’s the word again, *pretty*, that he’s completely silenced.

Matt runs a hand across his face and laughs a little. “Fuck, man, what are we doing?”

Ben’s blood runs cold. Of course.

“What do you mean?”

He feels bold alongside his anxiety. He wants to hear Matt say it. He wants to grab his face and kiss him. Jesus, this is fucking horrid.

Matt steps closer again, and he smells too fucking good, minty and tequila-sweet, his flushed skin inches away from Ben’s. He doesn’t say a word.

Ben’s breath is quick and uneven. Ben’s hand is shaky as he lifts it up and rests it against Matt’s jaw, fingers wrapping slightly around his skull, grazing his ear. Ben’s thumb presses into Matt’s cheek lightly.

And Matt isn’t pulling away. He’s standing there, eyes widened, lips slightly puckered, like he doesn’t have a single fucking thing to think about.

“Am I wrong?” Ben asks, a whisper, his gaze drifting casually between Matt’s liquor-laced lips and his shiny eyes. So fucking close. Ben can almost taste him. So close.

“I—” Matt manages before smacking his lips together, dry, taking a shallow breath through his nose. “My breath is bad. No mints.”

Ben laughs, genuinely, and lets his second hand rest on Matt’s other cheek, framing his face. He leans in closer, close enough to swear his mouth grazes Matt’s. “I’ll give you a score. Breath score.”

“God no,” Matt whispers back, one hand coming up to cradle the back of Ben’s neck. “Are you gonna fuckin’ kiss me, or what?”

“Do you want me to?” Ben smiles, lopsided and awkward, his mouth open and hovering over Matt’s.

Matt takes a shaky inhale, nods slowly like he’s only just made up his mind. “Yes. Yeah.”

Ben takes a second to bottle this up for later just in case everything

goes horribly awry after this. In case Matt freaks out and stumbles out of the party and locks his door to keep Ben out forever. In case Matt tells his mom that they're no longer on speaking terms.

But he can barely imagine it when Matt's breaths are shaky and uncontrolled and his palm is sweaty against Ben's nape and he's so close that Ben can't see any of him, so close that Ben can only hope Matt is feeling the same as him. He wants to say something else. Something quippy and clever.

Instead, Matt's hand insistently presses against the back of his head, pushing him down and forward that excruciating extra inch, until their lips are flush together and Ben doesn't want to say anything ever again, actually, because he's *kissing* Matt. Holy shit, he's actually—

He's dizzy. Reasonably so. Their lips are together for no more than three seconds but Ben feels like he's burning through an entire winter's supply of firewood inside of his stomach. He feels like he's spreading himself out, stretching around Matt, around the way his mouth tastes like beer and tequila and vague coconut and he's panting from a three-second kiss.

"You were taking too long," Matt whispers, grinning, and Ben feels like laughing, so he does.

"Wanted to give you an out," Ben shakily whispers back, and goddamn *Afternoon Delight* is blasting behind them (seriously, who the fuck picked the music?), and he's never felt more drunk than he does right now.

"Don't need one."

Ben leans back slightly, looks at Matt's stupidly sincere eyes, his parted lips. His skin is moonlight-blue and the shoulder of his shirt still has the remnants of a ketchup stain from last year and he's here with Matt and he can't believe how blind he's been.

He pulls Matt back towards him, one hand snaking down to Matt's neck, and crashes their mouths together sloppily, insistently. He holds Matt's face in place, fingernails dug into the back of his head, and Matt opens his mouth like he's been waiting for this for years, sucks down on Ben's lower lip and makes a contented sound.

It's sloppy and clumsy and wet and terrifying and it's *real.* The way Matt is kissing back, kissing back, kissing *back.*

There's no time to waste. Ben is frenzied in a way he doesn't recognize, hands crowding to dig into Matt's hip, pulling him closer, fearful of his possible departure. It's suddenly hot in here. And he's sweating and he's panting and his mouth is open against Matt's again and they're swapping tequila breaths like the room's oxygen ran out sometime two minutes ago.

Matt kisses him again, opens his mouth and lets his tongue slip inside, and Ben gets a bout of goosebumps he's sure Matt can feel, shivering. His hands are exploring, lingering on Ben's arms, his neck, his waist, his hair.

It's electrifying. Ben's skin has never felt more exposed, Matt's fingerprints like a million little magnifying glasses. Their teeth are scraping together, tongues insistent and hot, heavy panting filling the air.

Ben tests his limits, carefully sliding his hands under Matt's shirt, pressing both of his warm palms against the hot skin of Matt's hips, gripping him, pulling him closer. He hangs on the way Matt's mouth separates from his as he lets out a broken moan, immediately running his hands through Ben's hair.

Fuck what everybody has ever said — making out with your best friend is actually pretty fucking awesome. Ben thinks so. He runs his hands up Matt's back, listens to the way Matt's breath catches in his throat, and he can't reasonably be expected to think anything else.

And then Matt's hand trails down his back to slip under the waistband of his jeans and Matt presses himself impossibly closer and it's suddenly so obvious how ridiculously hard he is that it threatens to freak him out.

He separates them, turns his head to the side. Matt's kissing at the side of his neck, mouth moist and determined. "Matt," Ben pants, fingernails dug subtly into the middle of Matt's back. "I'm fuckin'—"

"Fuck, I know," Matt mumbles out against the jut of his jaw, and Ben believes him, believes that Matt just read his fucking mind. "I want—"

"I know," Ben whimpers back, his turn to mind-read, grinding his hips down once to rub them together lazily. A taste of friction just sends him reeling, eyes rolled back, letting out a laugh-moan like he can't believe what's happening.

And just as he's building up the gall to push Matt backwards and

stumble onto some guy's fucking bed, because he really does need to get off, the door begins to push in.

Ben pounds his back against the door, hands glued to Matt's back, both of them frozen in place, staring at each other like they're trying to figure out who's the headlights and who's the deer.

"Ocupado!" Ben shrills, high-pitched and anxious, staring down at Matt lingering somewhere around eye height with his collarbones.

Matt mouths *ocupado?* with a laugh shining through his frown and Ben swats the back of his head.

The door keeps pushing in, and Ben is getting shocked forward, each attempt making him vaguely nauseous. "Dude, try a different room!" Ben shouts now, barely heard over some Queen song Ben should probably recognize but he's hard enough to be in real pain and Matt is hiding his head in his neck, laughing, and it's all a little much.

"This is *my* room!" The guy at the other end of the door says, and Ben and Matt look at each other, perplexed, eyes wide, as Matt backs away.

"Get on the bed," Ben whispers, mouths it, frantically motioning over to the twin-sized bed. "You're passed out!"

That's all the convincing Matt needs until he jumps on the bed and hangs himself halfway off, lazily opening his mouth and shutting his eyes tightly. Ben adjusts himself, thankful for the dark room, and settles his hair before stepping away from the door.

The guy, David's roommate — Jeremy or James or something — comes bursting in and doesn't look particularly mad, just exhausted.

"I'm sorry, man. He drank too much," Ben mutters, pointing over at Matt's shockingly accurate portrayal of an extremely inebriated person.

"Fuck," Jeremy/James says, and he walks right up to Matt, shoving at his shoulder. "Dude, wake up," he mutters, shaking him harder. "Is that Matt?"

"Yeah," Ben answers quickly, wiping his mouth, shoving his hands in his pockets.

Matt stirs a little, fake-opens his eyes and yawns. Ben almost smiles

but maintains his acting abilities and stays as stoic as possible. “Whas’ happening?” He sleepily asks, keeping one eye open as he stares between Jeremy/James and Ben.

“This is my bed, asshole. Go to your place,” he murmurs, pushing at Matt’s shoulder again, already hauling himself on his bed.

“Sorry,” Matt mumbles back, slowly sitting up and rubbing his eyes. “Dizzy.”

Ben bites the inside of his cheek and makes his way over to Matt. “I got you,” he casually assures him, throwing Matt’s arm around himself and tucking his hand around his lower back to get him to stand up.

Matt grins at him, toothy and childish, as they fake-stumble over to the door.

It’s strangely satisfying to walk through a crowd of people with the guy you’re probably in love with under your arm after having made out behind a closed door, unbeknownst to every person surrounding you.

They manage their way out, Ben ignoring the way two girls mumble about it not even being midnight yet, and Matt immediately stops dragging his feet, arm slung around Ben’s waist.

It should probably be awkward. Ben feels like it should be. But he can’t get the goddamn grin off of his face and he doesn’t even have to look over to know that Matt’s grin is just as wide.

Once they get back to Matt’s dorm, both of them immediately slouch into the bed, backs against the wall. Ben’s heart is beating loud enough to be heard by at least half of Boston. He glances over at Matt already glancing back at him and smiles.

“Hey,” he whispers, eyelids heavy, tequila and beer catching up to him.

Matt bites the inside of his cheek, attempting to hide the involuntary quirk of his lips. “Hi.”

The inertia of the moment is lost, but Ben can’t find it in himself to be at all upset about it. Because he leans in and kisses Matt chastely in a familiar sort of way and that might be even better. “Did you change shampoos?” He asks stupidly, like he hasn’t been able to get the question off his mind all day, and Matt laughs against his mouth.

“That’s so gay,” he mumbles, smiling stupid and bright, kissing Ben again while nodding. “I did.”

“Peppermint?”

“You should go to hair college,” Matt mutters in between two kisses, one hand coming up to run through the side of Ben’s hair.

“I believe that falls under,” Ben starts, interrupted by Matt’s lips again, “Cosmetology. Harvard boy.”

Matt pinches Ben’s waist, laughs against him, and Ben feels like he’s being pranked by the universe or some entity people like to call God because Matt is beautiful and real and here. And Ben has barely even had time to fully examine how he feels about him but that’s wholly unimportant when just sitting here, lips wet and happy, feels like the trite beginning to some idiotic romcom they’d both make fun of.

“Want me to pull out the mattress?” Ben asks, like a subtle way of silently begging to try and make the whole sleeping-in-a-twin-bed thing work.

Matt pinches him again. “I’m not letting you leave tomorrow wearing more of my clothing,” he mutters, kissing Ben one last time before lying back on his bed, sneakers resting on Ben’s lap.

“That’s a no, then?” Ben grins, taking Matt’s sneakers off one by one, tossing them next to the bed.

Matt’s taking off his jeans, shimmying out of them and tossing those aside, as well, landing a useless punch on Ben’s shoulder. “Shut up. Go to sleep,” he murmurs, but his smile is blinding even in the dark, and his feet are teasing at the hem of Ben’s (his own) shirt. “Take my shirt off.”

“This a ploy to see me naked, Damon?” Ben raises an eyebrow, but immediately lifts the shirt over his head, tossing it right at Matt’s playfully annoyed eye roll.

Matt peels the shirt off, slings it back on the floor where it came from, and pulls Ben on top of him. “Would I still need a ploy for that?” He dares, wrapping one leg around Ben’s waist, grin wide and teasing as he stares up.

“God, have you ever heard of subtlety?” Ben mumbles, beaming, thinking about how good life might be if they can keep this up.

Matt just shakes his head and snakes his hand around Ben's neck, pulling him closer, sucking gently against his bottom lip in a short kiss.

And as Ben tastes the tequila on Matt's lips, there comes this very real fear of abandonment.

They're drunk. At the very least, they're not sober. Okay, maybe not drunk enough to pretend they're not currently cognizant, but drunk enough to mutually decide that this is not real life tomorrow morning. Once all the adrenaline and magic and excitement has worn off, Ben could become another Chrissy Polachek. He doesn't wanna be another fucking Chrissy Polachek.

But coming right out and saying that — asking for reassurance like some fucking chick — is arguably worse than just rolling with whatever Matt is prepared to hand him.

Maybe he'll wake up refreshed, Matt tucked against his neck, complaining about morning breath and stealing another one of Matt's shirts to head out and get breakfast.

Maybe he'll wake up in the middle of the night to Matt scrambling off of the bed, finding a spot on the floor to call his bed while Ben hogs his mattress. Maybe he'll wake up again hours later to a sticky note on the table and no sign of Matt beyond the smell of his stupid peppermint shampoo.

He feels a sharp flick to his temple. Matt is staring up at him with his eyebrows downturned in annoyance, frowning. "Why are you thinking so goddamn loud?"

Ben clenches his jaw, stares at the beautiful face beneath him, and realizes it might be the last time he'll get to see Matt like this. He has to make his peace with that. There are so many ways for this to end.

"It's nothing." He knows his voice is small and unconvincing. He feels Matt's palm slide across the small of his back, soothing.

"It's okay," Matt mumbles, and he can't exactly look at Ben, face turned subtly to avert his eye contact to the ceiling. "If you're not— not ready. Or if you— if this isn't what you want. I can take it."

Ben snorts out a laugh. "You're so fuckin' stupid sometimes," he whispers, mouth trailing to Matt's jaw, lingering against the soft line of his neck. "Do me a favor and shut the fuck up."

“Then stop looking at me all pensively,” Matt requests.

“Fine,” Ben murmurs, rolling off of Matt to barely squeeze next to him. He unbuttons and slides his jeans off quickly, leaving him in his boxers.

As soon as he throws his hands behind his head, Matt shifts in closer, hesitantly, stopping short of throwing his arm around Ben like that’s somehow crossing the line.

Ben can’t deny that he’s still subtly shaking, the past two hours a complete blur from getting ready to making out against a fucking door to lying in bed together, but Matt seems okay with this. Matt seems to be doing alright.

“C’mere,” Ben whispers, reaching his arm fully around Matt to pull him in, to give both of them a bit more space. He barely cares about the fact that he’s practically falling off the bed once Matt tucks himself under his arm, head on his chest.

“Okay?” Matt asks, tentatively spreading his arm across Ben’s waist.

“Yeah. Yeah, you’re good. You comfortable?”

Matt nods against his skin and tucks his hand behind Ben, taking a subtle breath in.

Ben can’t even imagine throwing the sheets on them. He’s burning up from Matt’s tacky skin against his own, the pure anxiety of it all, none of it allowing him a second of properly-functioning homeostasis.

It’s dark. The moon is bright and the streetlights are dull outside the window but inside, it’s all dark. Ben’s getting the firefly feeling again, just wishing for some way to light this moment up, to see it outside of himself, to squeeze it until the pressure gets him a tiny little diamond.

And then— “Do you think, I don’t know, that… that we might be making a mistake?” Matt’s voice is small, questioning, not malicious but unfortunately inquisitive.

Ben doesn’t know how to answer that.

Truthfully, yeah. Probably. This is probably not a good idea.

When he doesn’t answer for what might be ten seconds or fifty minutes, he couldn’t say, Matt chimes back in: “Just. Friends who,

y'know, get together or whatever. It doesn't— It's never what they want it to be. And I don't want— No, man, I *can't* lose you to this. To anything."

Ben pushes his lips into a tight line, squeezes Matt's shoulder. God, of course he doesn't want to lose Matt either.

"I dunno," he whispers back, quiet, honest, suddenly thankful for the darkness. "It doesn't have to be anything. For now. We can just— We're still just us. We can handle it."

Matt smiles. Ben can feel the corner of his mouth quirk up. "Isn't that what I told you when you cried about me going to Harvard?"

"Hey, fuck you," Ben laughs, knocking his knee against Matt's, "Trying to have a heartfelt moment here."

"Right, sorry, sorry," he hurries out, but he's laughing, too, hooking a leg on top of Ben's, close enough to be completely incriminating.

"And I didn't cry. Dickhead."

"Jury's out on that one."

Ben scoffs, ruffling Matt's hair. "I could just bike home, y'know? Never see this dump again."

"Oh, please. You couldn't last a week without my peppermint hair."

Ben wants to do a million things right now: kick Matt, wrestle Matt to the ground, bike home to prove his point, smoke a cigarette, kiss Matt, smack Matt, kiss Matt some more, look for the t-shirts Matt has stolen from him, bike back to Harvard because he's weak, kiss Matt out on the Yard.

Instead, he sighs, shuts his eyes, and mutters, quietly, with a sanguine earnesty, "I really couldn't."

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